

Leading Teams

SETTING THE STAGE
FOR GREAT
PERFORMANCES

J. Richard Hackman

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS
Boston, Massachusetts

as each crew developed and fine-tuned its own way of doing things. It was not uncommon for a crew to invent and test a service strategy that other crews had already tried and abandoned as a bad idea. Indeed, it sometimes seemed as if each crew was intent on becoming its own little airline—which, of course, meant that the face the company presented to its customers varied from day to day and from crew to crew. At the domestic carrier, the creativity seen so rarely at the international airline occasionally was present in excess, or was used to benefit the team itself rather than the airline and its customers.

From Ch. 1 "The Challenge"

EFFECTIVE WORK TEAMS

Let us now return to the question with which the chapter began. Given the experiences of the international and domestic airlines, what would you do to ensure that teams of flight attendants consistently provide the highest possible quality of service to passengers?

The international airline's answer to the question was to engineer and preprogram the work to the fullest extent possible. It achieved predictability and protection from excessive downside risk, but at a considerable cost: Both individual flight attendants and cabin crew teams were significantly underutilized. Managers at this airline left a significant amount of talent on the table. The domestic airline had the opposite problem. Its customer service teams brimmed with energy and innovation and were ready to turn on a dime to solve the problems and exploit the opportunities they encountered. But there was a pervasive worry at the company that some team somewhere in the system might be just about to fly out of control. Managers at this airline, one suspects, did not rest as well at night as did their counterparts at the international carrier.

Is it possible to eat one's cake and have it too? Can one achieve creativity, agility, and learning while still maintaining reasonable levels of consistency, control, and alignment with collective objectives? The message of this book is that, with wise and assertive team leadership, that is indeed possible. It is not a matter of threading carefully between the poles of creativity and control. As we will see, superb leadership can make it possible for teams, in their everyday work, to operate as well as the domestic airline flight attendant team did when it instantly adapted its

performance strategy to the different circumstances of the Florida and Boston flights, and as well as the international airline team did when it got into gear and took such good care of its customers after the emergency landing.

The very best work teams always serve their customers well, of course. But they also become increasingly capable performing units over time, as members gain experience and discover new and better ways of working together. And, finally, they provide settings in which each individual member can find in his or her teamwork a good measure of personal learning and fulfillment. An effective work team does all three of these things. Because the main purpose of this book is to identify what leaders can do to help teams achieve and sustain a high standing on all three of these criteria, we will take the next few pages to deepen our understanding of them.³

Serving Clients

The productive output of the team (that is, its product, service, or decision) meets or exceeds the standards of quantity, quality, and timeliness of the team's clients—the people who receive, review, or use the output. Those of us who study team performance in the experimental laboratory often can finesse the problem of deciding just what *effective* means. We can, for example, construct a task that has a clean, reliable performance measure—such as the number of puzzles a group solves in a given time period, or whether a group comes up with the one right answer to the problem we asked them to solve. And then we can proceed to investigate experimentally the factors that enhance or depress a team's score on that measure.

Effectiveness criteria are not so straightforward for teams that perform work in organizational settings. Few organizational tasks have clear right-or-wrong answers, for example. Nor do they lend themselves to simple, unidimensional numerical measures that validly indicate how well a group has done its work. Even for teams whose performance can be timed or counted, such "objective" measures rarely tell the whole story (or, in many cases, the most important part of the story) about how they are doing.

As part of our *Groups That Work* project a few years ago, Mary Lou Davis-Sacks and I studied a number of teams in the Fiscal Analysis

Branch of the federal Office of Management and the Budget (OMB).⁴ Among the teams in the branch were some whose work was to perform economic analyses for the director of OMB and his staff. How should the reports prepared by these teams have been assessed?

One possibility was to obtain judgments of the "objective" quality of the reports, using generally accepted standards for economic research, the kinds of criteria that editors of economic journals use in deciding whether to publish an article. Team members, all of whom were civil servants and many of whom held advanced degrees in economics, knew and respected these standards. They would have been quite comfortable having the standards used to assess their products.

Yet what actually *happened* to the teams' reports—and, ultimately, to the teams themselves—depended mainly on the views of the OMB political officials for whom the work was done. These officials sought bullet-proof analyses because the findings were certain to be carefully scrutinized by political opponents. Even more important to the political officials, however, were the timeliness of the reports and their usefulness in promoting the president's political and policy agendas. A publishable-quality report that arrived the day *after* the director testified in Congress, or one that focused mainly on issues of interest to the team itself, would be ignored. Worse, if the team's reports came to be viewed as useless or self-serving, the political staff might well arrange to do its own analyses—in effect, freezing the civil servant teams out of the policy-making process.

It is the client's standards and assessments that count. Not those of the team itself, except in those rare cases when the team is the client of its own work. Not those of outside researchers or evaluators, except when they are engaged to do an assessment by those who *do* have legitimacy as reviewers. And not even those of the team's manager, who rarely is the person who actually receives and uses a team's output. Rather than serve as a surrogate client, the manager's job is first to help the team identify the standards that are used by its real clients, and then to do whatever can be done to help the team meet those standards.

A large number of "But what if . . ." objections flow immediately from this view. What if the client has bad judgment? What if the client's standards are far too low or too high? What if the client wants something inappropriate or even illegal? What if the client doesn't even *know* what he or she wants? What if there are multiple clients, and they want incompatible

things? In such questions lie real opportunities for a work team and its leaders—opportunities that might never surface were the team to focus mainly on self- or manager-defined performance criteria. Explicitly addressing the fact that different clients have different views of what *good* means (or views that differ from the team's own), for example, can break a team out of its usual routines and, sometimes, result in innovative performance strategies.

Professional symphony orchestras can be viewed as large teams whose clients are audiences. Orchestra musicians like to play music that stretches and challenges them, but many audiences prefer music that is melodic and familiar. The imperfect alignment between team members and clients about the definition of a "good" concert has become increasingly consequential in the last decade as the economic situation of many orchestras has worsened. These times require that most concert hall seats be filled and that people pay substantial sums of money to sit in them.

The ensembles that Jutta Allmendinger, Erin Lehman, and I assessed in our research on professional symphony and chamber orchestras responded to this challenge in a variety of ways.⁵ One orchestra succumbed to the wishes of its audience and, in effect, converted itself into a full-time pops ensemble. The concert hall brimmed with people who were enjoying themselves hearing old favorites, but neither the orchestra nor its audiences were being stretched. A self-governing orchestra took almost the opposite tack. To challenge themselves musically, members decided to play what *they* wanted to play. Audiences dwindled as patrons stayed away from concerts dominated by unfamiliar, strange-sounding music. By focusing on the wishes of team members to the near-exclusion of those of its clients, this orchestra came perilously close to going out of business.

A third orchestra attended to *both* musicians' and audience members' views of what a "good" performance is—but also took initiatives to bring audience members' criteria more closely into alignment with its own. Programming at this orchestra had the feel of a sandwich: Some meaty new music was performed in the middle of the program, between an engaging opening number and the major concluding work. The top and bottom slices of the sandwich provided the incentive to get people into the hall, where they also were exposed to (and, one hopes, gradually came to enjoy) serious contemporary music.

Through its artistic programming, supplemented by other educational initiatives such as preconcert discussions, this orchestra altered its clients' views of what "good performance" means. But what if a legitimate client knowingly asks a team to do something that is wrong or inappropriate? In the heat of the budget season at OMB, the fiscal analysis teams began to get cues from their political clients that it would be helpful if the team's reports were more directly supportive of the administration's position. Might it be possible to omit certain projections about the possible implications of the administration's proposals on the national debt? These extrapolations, after all, are almost certainly unreliable. Besides, including them could distract attention from the many positive features and short-term benefits of the proposals. Might the team be willing to orient its analyses and reports just a bit more in the president's direction?

David Mathiasen, the chief of the Fiscal Analysis Branch, felt it was time for an informal tour of the political side of the house to see if he could reduce some of the pressure on his teams. He reminded the team's clients why it was in their own best interest to have reports that were as complete and trustworthy as the analysts could make them. Mathiasen also met with his own manager, the head of the Budget Review Division, to suggest that he reaffirm with the director himself the importance of civil servant staff not becoming politicized.

These initiatives did appear to reduce the number of inappropriate requests made of the fiscal analysis teams—for a time. But the process of shaping clients' views of what good performance meant was, for these clients, never ending and never sufficient. Therefore, Mathiasen also worked directly and extensively with his analysis teams, making sure that members had a deep understanding of their ultimate purposes and norms of conduct that were consistent with those purposes. These leadership initiatives strengthened the teams' ability to deflect political pressures when teams did encounter them, and helped ensure that they could continue to make their unique contributions to the inherently political budget-making process.

Some teams are fortunate in that all relevant parties—the team, its managers, and its clients—agree on the criteria by which the team's work will be assessed. Less fortunate teams still have many options. They can educate their clients. They can apply political pressure. They can try to replace recalcitrant clients with others who are more amenable to the team's

own aspirations for its work. Or they can succumb and do exactly what the clients want. All of these approaches, in various circumstances, can be appropriate.

What is never appropriate is to say, when the client finds the group's work wanting, "The group did great; it was just that the client was dumb." The group produced a wonderful new software package, but users were not perceptive enough to buy it. The team created a fine treatment regimen, but the patient would not cooperate. The staff came up with an elegant transportation plan, but the bureau chief wouldn't have it. All of these are group failures, and all of them stem from the team not taking seriously the fact that what good performance *means* is whatever the group's clients think it means.

Good teams know that, and meet their clients' expectations. Great teams actively shape those expectations, and then exceed them.

Growing as a Team

The social processes the team uses in carrying out the work enhance members' capability to work together interdependently in the future. Printed across the front of a T-shirt worn by a bearded, professorial-looking individual near Harvard Square: "The older I get . . ." On the back: ". . . the better I get." That may or may not have been true for the professor, but, as we will see in the next chapter, it is true for lots of teams. Over time, members come to know one another's special strengths and weaknesses and become highly skilled in coordinating their activities, anticipating one another's next moves and initiating appropriate responses to them even as those moves are occurring.

Other groups show the opposite pattern, as was illustrated by a two-person Boeing 737 cockpit crew I observed. The crew had gotten off to a bad start the previous day and things had deteriorated ever since. Now it was the crew's last leg together and the tension was palpable. The captain was flying, which meant that the first officer would operate the radios, manipulate the landing gear and flap levers, and keep an eye out for conflicting traffic. As the aircraft lifted off the runway, the captain glanced over to the first officer and nodded his head almost imperceptibly. That was his signal for the first officer to raise the gear. There was no response; the first officer kept his eyes outside the cockpit looking for other aircraft.

After a few seconds, the captain took his right hand off the control yoke and made a thumbs-up gesture in his teammate's direction. Still no response from the first officer. Finally, the captain exploded: "Gear up, dammit!" Slowly, deliberately, the first officer turned to his captain and said, "I believe the correct phraseology, Captain, is 'Positive rate of ascent, gear up.'" The captain's response was to grab the gear lever himself and slam it into the up position. The rest of that last leg was flown in almost complete silence.

As I held my breath hoping that nothing would go wrong on that flight that would require the crew to operate as a real team, I reflected on a less dramatic but otherwise similar experience of my own. A few years before, the president of the university where I then worked had asked me to serve on a committee to identify candidates for a deanship that had become vacant. According to the first of the three criteria of team effectiveness, our committee was a success. The president liked the candidate we recommended and appointed him as dean. By the time that happened, however, I already had made my vow: Never again, no matter what, would I do *anything* that required me to work with the other members of that search committee. If the president wished to consider additional candidates, he would have to appoint a new committee. Ours had destroyed itself in the process of doing its work.

Effective work teams operate in ways that build shared commitment, collective skills, and task-appropriate coordination strategies—not mutual antagonisms and trails of failures from which little is learned. They become adept at detecting and correcting errors before serious damage is done, and at noticing and exploiting emerging opportunities. And they periodically review how they have been operating, milking their experiences for whatever learning can be had from them. An effective team is a more capable performing unit when its work is finished than it was when work began.

Individual Members' Learning

The group experience, on balance, contributes positively to the learning and personal well-being of individual team members. Work teams have much to offer their members. Teams are, for example, wonderful sites for learning—for expanding one's knowledge, acquiring new skills, and exploring

perspectives on the world that differ from one's own. Teamwork also can engender feelings of belonging, providing members a secure sense of their place in the social world. And, of course, working with others on a shared task can spawn satisfying interpersonal relationships, some of which may flower into friendships that extend well beyond the group setting where they were formed.⁶

Why, then, when I announce on the first day of class that students will do a group project for which members will get a common grade, does the classroom fill with barely suppressed groans? The answer, of course, is that my students have done group projects before, and they know how awful it gets when a team does not work. Being a professor who aspires to empathy, I always acknowledge that some project groups do turn out to be more frustrating than fulfilling, more a source of angst than of learning. But the groups in my course, I assure them, will be different.

In fact, the students' previous experiences mirror my own. Membership on teams such as the deanship search committee has left me dispositionally disinclined to work in teams, preferring instead to work by myself whenever I can. Like the students, I have felt the frustration that comes from trying to craft a group product that all members find acceptable. And I know from research, but also from experience, that teams can stress their members, alienate them from one another, and undermine their confidence in their own abilities. Many work teams, perhaps even most of them, provide their members with significantly less personal learning and satisfaction than they could.

While not denying the inevitability of rough spots in the life of any group, I nonetheless do not count as effective any team for which the impact of the group experience on members' learning and well-being is more negative than positive. If the group prevents members from doing what they want and need to do, if it compromises their personal learning, or if members' main reactions to having been in the group are frustration and disillusionment, then the costs of generating the group product were too high.

Using the Criteria

Although it can take some effort to think through just what "effective" performance would mean for a given work team, it invariably is worth the

trouble. For one thing, it forces us to be clear and explicit about our values, about what it is that we are hoping for and trying to promote when we create work teams. It lessens the likelihood that we will thoughtlessly use whatever performance indicators happen to be available or easy to obtain. It makes salient the fact that teams must continuously manage trade-offs among the three different aspects of overall effectiveness rather than focus exclusively on any one of them. And, finally, explicit effectiveness criteria provide a standard for testing and choosing among various structural or managerial interventions that may be contemplating. "If we did that," one can ask, "how would it affect the team's standing on the criteria that we care most about? Why does it think so?" Asking such questions promotes thoughtfulness of the types that can lessen the number of times that well-meaning interventions turn out to yield unexpected and unfortunate consequences.

The three criteria—a team product acceptable to clients, growth in team capability, and a group experience meaningful and satisfying for members—can be used to assess the effectiveness of any work team, regardless of task or setting. The relative weight of the three criteria, however, does vary across circumstances. For example, a temporary self-managing team were formed to perform a single task of extraordinary importance, then the second and third dimensions would be of lesser relevance to that team's overall effectiveness. On the other hand, tasks sometimes are created mainly to help members gain experience, learn some things, and become competent as a performing unit. During the startup of an engine manufacturing plant, for example, management created a special "core skills" production unit specifically to build team members' skills and experience for the work they subsequently would do in metal-working teams.⁷ The task in such cases may be as much an excuse for the unit as the reason for it, and assessments of team effectiveness would depend more on the second and third criteria than on the first.

Including social and personal criteria in a definition of effectiveness is a departure from tradition in small-group research, as is my emphasis on system-defined (rather than researcher-defined) assessments of a group's productive output. Yet the criteria themselves require neither extraordinary accomplishment nor exemplary social processes. All that is necessary for effectiveness is output judged acceptable by those who

receive or use it, a team that winds up its work at least as capable as when it started, and members who are at least as satisfied as they are frustrated by what has transpired. The challenge is to generate ways of understanding, designing, and managing teams that help them meet or exceed these modest criteria.

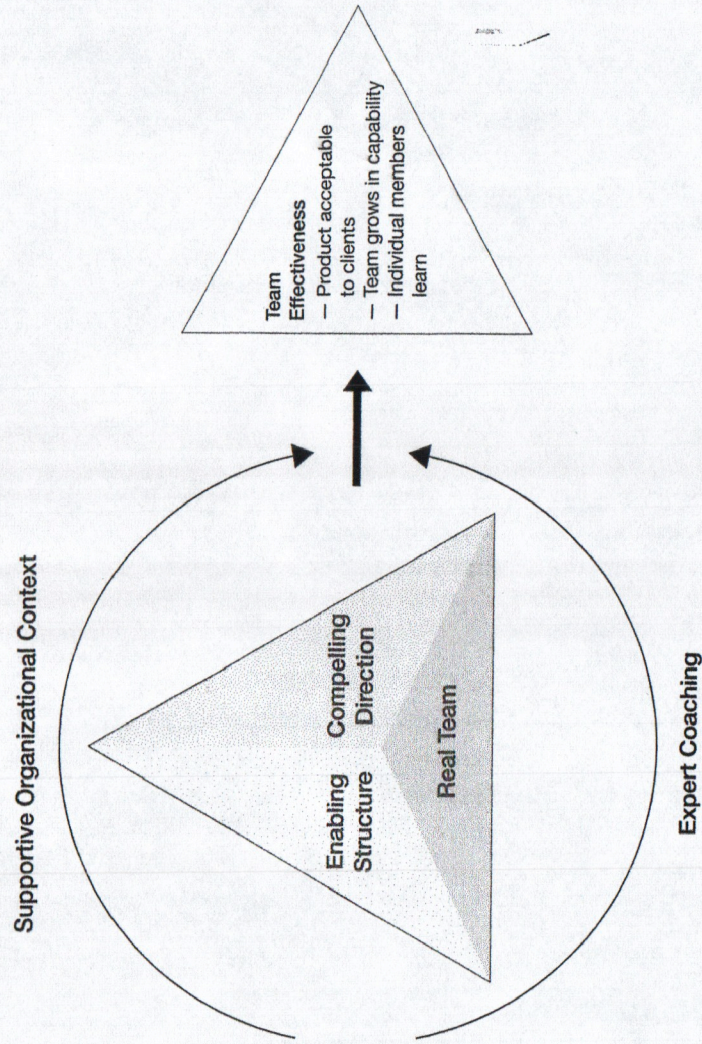
CREATING CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVENESS

This book identifies and explores the five conditions that leaders can put in place to increase the chances that a team will, over time, achieve and sustain a high standing on the three criteria just discussed. Specifically, the likelihood of effectiveness is increased when a team (1) is a *real team* rather than a team in name only, (2) has a *compelling direction* for its work, (3) has an *enabling structure* that facilitates rather than impedes teamwork, (4) operates within a *supportive organizational context*, and (5) has available ample *expert coaching* in teamwork.

Each of these conditions, depicted in figure 1-1, is addressed in turn in the five chapters that follow. The first three of these chapters address the three core conditions for effectiveness—namely, creating a real team with a compelling purpose and an enabling structure. The next two chapters discuss the two conditions that can help a team harvest the benefits of a good basic design—namely, a supportive organizational context and expert coaching in teamwork. Finally, the concluding section of the book explores the implications of this way of thinking about work teams for larger questions about group and organizational leadership and change.

To view team leadership as creating conditions that increase the chances that a team will evolve into an effective performing unit is somewhat unconventional. Both practicing managers and writers about management commonly view the actions of leaders as "causes" and the responses of teams as "effects." In cause-effect models, particular leader behaviors and styles are viewed as strongly determining team behavior and performance. By contrast, I view the main responsibility of leaders as creating and maintaining the five conditions that increase the chances that a team will, over time, become increasingly effective in carrying out its work.

FIGURE 1 - 1

The Conditions for Team Effectiveness

No one person has sole responsibility for team leadership. Leadership is provided by anyone who helps create and maintain the performance-enhancing conditions, regardless of whether that person happens to hold a formal leadership role. Nor is there any one right way for leaders to behave. Instead, they use whatever expertise they have and whatever resources they can corral to get the five key conditions in place and keep them there. This book explores what is involved in doing that, how it can be done well, and what those who would lead teams can do to build their own leadership capabilities.